

Specialty Choice Of Medical Graduates

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Summary

Objective: To investigate the specialty choice of Hong Kong medical graduates. **Design:** Mailed questionnaire survey. **Subjects:** A total of 139 students who attended the General Practice Unit of the University of Hong Kong for their general practice teaching during 1993 were surveyed in the second half of 1995 i.e. approximately 12 months after graduation. Complete data were collected for 88 (63.5%) of the graduates after four rounds of mailing. **Results:** General Medicine was the most popular with 48 (54.5%) graduates selecting it as one of their combined top three choices, followed by Accident & Emergency (A&E) (36 graduates, 40.9%) and General Practice (35 graduates, 39.8%). Male and female graduates showed similar patterns except towards Surgical specialties and Obstetrics and Gynaecology (O&G). **Conclusions:** These results provide indication on the competitiveness of specialty choices and the need for specialty counselling for junior doctors. It also reveals the possibility of an undecided stage towards specialty choice at the end of internship and raises the need for general rotation during early postgraduate years. (HK Pract 1996; 18: 504-512)

Keywords: Specialty choice, medical graduates, Hong Kong

摘要

目的：研究本地醫科畢業生的專科選擇。
研究方法：從郵寄問卷型式進行。
主題：經過四回郵寄問卷，88份問卷成功回收佔總數63.5%。全部問卷均在學生畢業後一年發出。
結果：內科訓練佔超過半數學生的前三項選擇，其次是急診室及全科訓練，除了在外科及婦產科的選擇中出現微小分別外，男女選擇相若。
結論：研究結果引出新畢業生在專科選擇中的競爭現象及各科輪調對年青醫生在專科選擇的重要性。

Introduction

Over 300 medical graduates are produced in Hong Kong each year, at great costs to the community. However, it is now well recognized world wide that undifferentiated doctors are produced at the end of their undergraduate training.^{1,2} Further specialty training is essential to equip junior doctors with the appropriate expertise to serve the community. It is therefore important for medical graduates to

have the information on the specialty choices of other graduates so that they know the competitiveness of their getting into their specialties of choice. It also allows the senior doctors to counsel junior doctors on their career choices. The medical profession and the community at large will also get the benefits by ensuring the specialty choices of the young graduates are matching the needs of the community. Literature on specialty choices of Hong Kong medical

graduates is scarce³ while such information is widely available in other countries.⁴⁻⁷

The objective of this study was therefore to examine the specialty choice of junior medical graduates at the University of Hong Kong.

Methods

Medical students at the University of Hong Kong attend a

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General Practice clerkship at the General Practice Unit either during the second half of Fourth year or the first half of Fifth year. Those students who attended their General Practice clerkship during 1993 were invited to provide their contact addresses so that a questionnaire could be sent to them in future. They were encouraged to provide addresses which they thought would be more permanent e.g. their parents' addresses instead of the addresses of their university accommodation colleges. The subjects of the questionnaire were not disclosed to the students.

This study was part of the project which examined medical graduates' attitudes towards the general practice clerkship and their specialty choice. A questionnaire was sent to these medical graduates during the second half of 1995 which was approximately twelve months after graduation for most of the respondents.

Four rounds of mailing were necessary to achieve a satisfactory response rate of 63.5%. The reminders were sent 6-8 weeks apart.

The results were analyzed using SPSS software.

Results

The age and sex distribution of the respondents is shown in **Table 1**. Over 80% of the respondents were male graduates and all of the respondents were within the narrow age range of 23 to 27.

The distribution of months of clinical experience is shown in **Table 2**. About 17% of the respondents were still in their intern year, most likely to be due to need to sit for supplementary final examinations.

The rank order of the first six most popular first specialty choices is shown in **Table 3**. General Medicine was by far the most popular choice for all graduates. General Surgery and Obstetrics & Gynaecology (O&G) were the second most popular among male and female graduates respectively, however the differences in their first specialty choices between the two sexes did not reach statistical

significance (chi-square=6.93; df=5; $0.50 > p > 0.10$).

The rank order of the first six combined first, second and third specialty choices of all graduates is shown in **Table 4**. General Medicine was again the most popular choices. However, Accident & Emergency (A&E), and General Practice became the next most popular choices. There were also different trends between male (**Table 5**) and female graduates (**Table 6**) in their combined first, second and third specialty choices but they did not reach statistical significance (chi-square=5.28; df=5; $0.50 > p > 0.10$).

Table 1: Age and sex distribution of respondents

Age	Female	Male
23	0	1
24	5	13
25	11	40
26	1	13
27	0	4
Total	17	71

Table 2: Distribution of duration of clinical experience

Months of clinical experience	Number
Less than 12 months	15
More than 12 months	73

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Table 3: Rank order of first six most popular first specialty choices

Rank	Specialty choice	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total (%)
1	General Medicine	5 (29.4)	23 (32.4)	28 (31.8)
2	General Surgery	1 (5.9)	12 (16.9)	13 (14.8)
3	Obstetrics & Gynaecology	4 (23.5)	5 (7.0)	9 (10.3)
4	Accident & Emergency	1 (5.9)	6 (8.5)	7 (8.0)
5	Paediatrics	2 (11.8)	4 (5.6)	6 (6.8)
6	Orthopaedics	0	5 (7.0)	5 (5.7)

Table 4: Rank order of the first six combined first, second and third specialty choices of all graduates

Rank	Specialty choice	Total no. of graduates
1	General Medicine	48
2	Accident & Emergency	36
3	General Practice	35
4	General Surgery	31
5	Obstetrics & Gynaecology	23
6	Paediatrics	19

Table 5: Rank order of the first six combined first, second and third specialty choices of male graduates

Rank	Specialty choice	Total no. of male graduates
1	General Medicine	41
2	Accident & Emergency	31
3	General Practice	28
4	General Surgery	24
5	Paediatrics	16
6	Obstetrics & Gynaecology	15

Table 6: Rank order of the first six combined first, second and third specialty choices of female graduates

Rank	Specialty choice	Total no. of female graduates
1	Obstetrics & Gynaecology	8
2	General Practice	7
3	General Medicine	7
4	General Surgery	7
5	Accident & Emergency	5
6	Paediatrics	3

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Key messages

- * The specialties which medical undergraduates and interns have more exposure e.g. General Medicine, General Surgery and Obstetrics and Gynaecology are the most popular first specialty choices.
- * General Medicine, Accident & Emergency, General Practice and General Surgery are the most popular combined first, second and third specialty choices.
- * The study shows that Accident & Emergency is particularly popular among junior doctors and it raises the possibility of a need to introduce general rotations in early post-internship years.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the specialty choices of medical graduates of the University of Hong Kong (HKU). It can be seen that the HKU medical graduates come from a very narrow age range and there are more male than female graduates.

The results of the present research indicate that the specialties which undergraduates and interns get most exposure are more popular among medical graduates. For instance, General Medicine is the most popular first and combined first, second and third specialty choices whereas General Surgery and O&G are the second and third most popular first choices respectively. It is hardly surprising to find junior medical graduates to select specialties to which they have had more exposure.⁷⁻¹⁰ However, an important question to ask is, "Does the community need such a large number of Internist or Surgeons or O&G specialists?" Furthermore,

the junior doctors also need to be made aware of the fact that they will face stiff competition if they want to be trained in the popular disciplines.

Another result worthy of special consideration is the fact that A&E is the second most popular of the combined first, second and third specialty choices of all junior doctors. Although A&E is now an established specialty of its own, it is still very surprising to find it being so popular as most junior doctors would have had relatively little exposure to it. It is possibly a reflection of the state of uncertainty towards specialty choice among junior doctors since a period of general rotational training is not available to most graduates after their internships, except probably General Practice trainees. Further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis and if it is confirmed, general rotations in early post-internship years should then be introduced in all major hospitals. It will allow junior doctors more exposure to various disciplines and

in the mean time to consider their life long career choice. It would be a lot more worthwhile for these junior doctors to rotate through such a general training than to embark upon a specialty training prematurely only to discover that a wrong decision has been made.

In conclusion, this study provides up-to-date information on the specialty choices of the medical graduates of the University of Hong Kong and the likely competition of getting into these disciplines. It also raises the need to introduce a general rotation period in the early postgraduate years to allow our junior doctors more varied exposure to different disciplines and more time to consider their choices of life long medical career. ■

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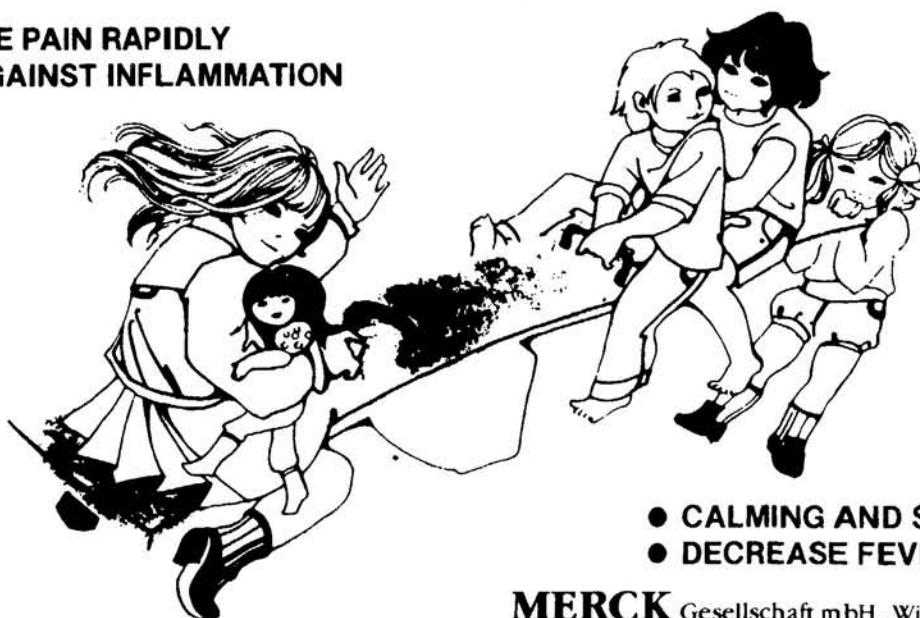
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